

Testimony Re: HB 5290 An Act Prohibiting Access to State Parks and Forests for Certain Conduct

Eileen Grant, President Friends of CT State Parks

43 Neptune Ave.

Madison, CT 06443

eileencgrant@gmail.com

Dear Members of the Committee,

Friends of CT State Parks, a coalition of 29 volunteer Friends groups with over 7000 members, donates considerable labor each year to enhance visitor experience in our State Parks and Forests (80,000 hours per year, valued at \$2.5 million per annum). In addition, our groups have given over \$8.5 million in goods, land, and equipment to a struggling Park System that has been seriously underfunded for three decades. A constant during these last 30 years has been the paucity of personnel tasked with caring for visitors, maintaining park structures, and stewarding 250,000 acres of public lands. Far too few Park caretakers are on hand to handle ordinary responsibilities let alone address the growing numbers of criminal conduct incidents throughout the Park System.

Patronage to Parks has ballooned to 13 million annual visitors in recent years. This is a testament to Parks' value to citizens' health and well-being, and their contributions to our economy. Most unfortunately, with increased usage and consequential societal benefit, has come a dramatic uptick in lawless destructive behaviors in a great many facilities. The Friends groups are in our parks volunteering daily throughout the State. They have been eye-witnesses on far too many occasions to dangerous and disruptive actions by patrons, often in our campgrounds. Every season the number of "domestics" (spousal and child abuse), the incidents of drug and alcohol intoxication, the brandishing of firearms and threats to and assault of Park workers and fellow patrons grow alarmingly. Vandalism is both ubiquitous and extremely costly, both in dollars and time. Insufficient numbers of Park staff do not have "spare" hours to waste repairing gates repeatedly pulled from the ground by pick up trucks using chains, or repairing trails shredded and rutted by ATV's, or replacing tools stolen from vehicles or buildings, or fixing shattered windows and door frames or removing graffiti that despoils the landscape and historic buildings. The dumping of household garbage, mattresses, appliances and defunct vehicles deep in our forests and beside our waterbodies is epidemic.

DEEP needs enforcement mechanisms that will meaningfully curtail these behaviors, safeguard innocent parkgoers, and protect our natural resources. I would encourage the members of the Committee to study and consider the changes to statute proposed in HB 5290, and most importantly get more personnel resources quickly into the field to deter these harmful and criminal actions by often- times repeat offenders.

Thank you for your attention,

Eileen Grant, President Friends of CT State Parks

